

[1961-July 21]

REPORT ON THE ANGEL RIVERA, 64-7TH AVE., APT. 12-A INCIDENT
AT COLUMBUS HOMES. MADE BY MRS. SYLVIA JOSEPHSON
OF TENANT RELATIONS DIVISION OF THE HOUSING AUTHORITY,
AT THE REQUEST OF D. S. ANTHONY, DIRECTOR,
MAYOR'S COMMISSION ON GROUP RELATIONS

Just before the July 4th Holiday, worker received a call from the Mayor's Commission on Group Relations about a complaint brought before their Commission involving a tenant named Angel Rivera, living at Columbus Homes.

It seems Mr. Rivera and some of his friends who are Puerto Rican claim there are abuses against Puerto Ricans where they live. The actual case placed before the Commission as described by Mr. Rivera involved himself and his friends. He claims they were talking and standing around one of the project buildings. A City policeman called, "Rocky", Badge 273 and a Housing Authority Guard, named Louis Venessia, came over and told them to leave, threatening them. Mr. Rivera said he would report them to the office. They became angry about this and later as he was sitting on one of the benches, came over to him again, ordered him to go up against the wall and searched him. He became angry and they grabbed him, leading him to the office. His son came out and they pushed him away. Mr. Rivera claims they hit him --- that the manager, Mr. Vitola, was in his office, saw this but did not even come out. He further claims they took him down to the maintenance room and "beat him up".

When worker heard this and at request of Mayor's Commission, we called Mr. Vitola to find out what he knew about this situation. He said he did see Mr. Rivera being lead toward office by "Rocky" and Mr. Venessia but he said there was a large crowd gathered and he felt this should be handled by the Police. He called the police and he said within minutes the Radio Police,

Emergency Police and Plainclothesmen came. He kept completely out of it but he did inquire what had happened. The information he got was that Mr. Rivera was "pitching quarters" and has done this several times. He has been warned about this but continues to do so. This time they picked him up for this. While they were taking him to office, he pulled away but "Rocky" and Mr. Venessia, on seeing this, hit Mr. Rivera. Mr. Vitola said he did see Mr. Rivera hit out and also Mr. Venessia hit him. This is all he knew. He claims the Rivera family have never been a problem except that Mr. Rivera does hang out a great deal around the project grounds. Mrs. Rivera is a nice woman who has even helped with Puerto Rican families. He is sorry this all happened but felt Mr. Rivera had some responsibility in this matter although he is not absolving anyone at this time.

7/6/61. Worker met with Mr. Anthony, Mayor's Commission director at his request to discuss this case. He asked worker to investigate and find out what the true facts are in this particular situation. The Commission moved to investigate the incident by interviewing the Housing Manager, Mr. Vitola, the Housing Guard and Policeman "Rocky", Badge 272 but Anthony does want to know our findings first.

7/7. Spoke to Mrs. Atosa, D.P.W. worker who lives at Columbus Homes and since she is Puerto Rican herself has been handling most welfare cases where the people only speak Spanish. She said the Rivera family has been on D.P.W. assistance since 1957. She has heard at one time two Spanish speaking women in the laundry of one of the project buildings discussing Mr. Rivera in Spanish, saying he stays around project grounds, passes remarks about women as they pass, etc. When they spotted her, they stopped because they recognized her and knew

she understood what they were saying. She has also seen him hanging around but she cannot say that he ever made any remarks to her since he does know who she is. Worker thanked her.

Worker went to the Rivera apartment. Both Mr. & Mrs. Rivera were at home. Worker has known Mrs. Rivera for a long time. She is a nice person and has helped some of the Spanish speaking people. The Rivera's have 7 children and Mr. Rivera claims he has been looking for work, is eligible to work but has not been able to find a job these four years. He is in the States about 7 years. He claims that "Rocky" and Mr. Venessia are prejudiced against Puerto Ricans; they are always threatening them.

If there are men around that are not Puerto Rican, they just pass them by but as soon as they see a group of Puerto Ricans they always "push them around". Mr. Vitola, he said and so did Mrs. Rivera, is always nice to them; they have nothing against him, except that Mr. Rivera felt Mr. Vitola did not come out and stop the above incident.

He repeated the happenings as stated at beginning of this report. He then showed worker the story in the Spanish Newspaper "El Dario". The headlines said something like this ---"Discrimination and Brutality at Housing Project"---, and a picture of Mr. Rivera and 7 other men reporting this incident to the paper. The story under picture and headline was similar to the one related to Mayor's Commission. Worker said to Mr. & Mrs. Rivera that this was unfair because it gave the impression that the Housing Authority discriminated and abused people of Puerto Rican nationality. They agreed this was not what they intended and that they had nothing against the Manager and Housing but against "Rocky" and Lou Venessia. Mr. Rivera denied that he was "pitching quarters" or that he passes remarks about women. He feels that they are just using this because

they know they are wrong. Worker urged him not to congregate with his friends around project because when women see 6 or 7 men together, they are afraid to go by - even if they are not speaking about them, they may feel they are. He said he understood and would cooperate but he wants something done about these two men who have been abusing him and his friends.

Worker then visited Angel Pereira, 74 - 7th Avenue, 11E, whose picture was in the paper with Mr. Rivera. Mr. Pereira is only 25, has been involved with a young daughter of one of our tenants. He had been taken to court and given a suspended sentence. He has been asked to move. This family consisted of Mr. & Mrs. Pereira and 2 young children. He claims that "Rocky" and Mr. Venessia are always "picking on" and threatening Puerto Ricans. He corroborated everything Mr. Rivera had said.

Worker then visited Mr. Garcia, 74-7th Avenue, 90. He too said that "Rocky" especially was very nasty and prejudiced against Puerto Ricans. He did not feel too antagonistic toward Lou Venessia and had no ill feelings toward Mr. Vitola at all. We also talked about women being afraid to pass by when there are groups of men congregating. His wife agreed with that. Mr. Garcia works, has a nice apartment with his wife and three children. He claims he needs more room, having only a 4 room apt. and implied that because he is Puerto Rican, he is not given a larger apt. Worker explained that this was definitely not true, because worker knows of many families who need larger apts but because of the shortage of larger apts, they are unable to make these moves. There is a list of families of all nationalities and races who need transfers but we are not able to accommodate them at this time.

Next, worker visited the Serrano Family. Julian Serrano, his wife, Mother and nine children live in the lobby apartment in 82-7th Avenue. Worker has known this family for years. His brother Pedro who lives in same building, came in. They were with Mr. Rivera when the incident took place. Mr. Serrano was very incensed about the treatment of Puerto Ricans by "Rocky" and Lou Venessia. He went even further, showed Worker a list of Puerto Rican families that signed a statement against these two men. Mr. Serrano said all his friends are family men, just get together and talk. Several are out of work and find it hard to just stay in their apartment. He said all the other Police and Housing Guards are friendly, speak to them nicely but these two seem to go out of their way to "chase them", threaten them, he claims they even threatened to shoot them. He feels they just hate Puerto Ricans and he was very angry about this. Since Worker has a good relationship with this family, they spoke freely. There is a little bit of a chip on their shoulders, Worker feels but there seems to be general agreement among the people Worker visited that "Rocky" and Lou Venessia are prejudiced against Puerto Ricans. There was no such feelings about the Manager, only that he didn't investigate it and punish these two men.

Worker then went back to office and spoke to Mr. Vitola, telling him something of the feelings expressed. He said he wished these people would have come in to see him and told him about this before but he does not remember them ever expressing these feelings to him personally.

7/21. Met with Mr. Lou Venessia about Rivera case. His version of the incident is as follows: He was walking with "Rocky", the City Policeman around the Project grounds and saw about 15 men around building 82 - 7th Ave. They were pitching quarters. They went over to them and told them to move. He said that they asked them not to loiter around buildings but to sit on the

benches, which are there for their convenience. Worker questioned Mr. Venessia about his searching them and he said that this was accepted procedure. They have had several complaints about this and also complaints from women who claim that these men made remarks about them and that they are afraid to pass them. The men disbanded but Mr. Rivera stood there muttering to himself. (Mr. Venessia at this point said that he has no prejudices, in fact, he has a nice relationship with many of the Puerto Rican families.) Later he was going home for dinner and "Rocky" was leaving the Project. They said "goodbye" to each other when they saw a group of men around Mr. Rivera. They were walking together. He asked what they were doing and Mr. Rivera said, "We're going to the F----- office to report you F----- B-----s. Mr. Venessia said, "You can't talk like that to me" and "Rocky", hearing this, came over also. He grabbed Mr. Rivera by the sleeve, the one that has no arm because he claims he did not want to hit him. Mr. Rivera pulled away and hit "Rocky", who fell down. Mr. Venessia, on seeing this, grabbed Mr. Rivera who then punched Mr. Venessia. Then Mr. Venessia hit him back. Mr. Rivera's son came out and started to throw rocks at Rocky and himself. They chased him. They then took Mr. Rivera to the Maintenance Room, still fighting and pushed him down the stairs to the room. He, Venessia, claims they did not hit him there. The police came at that point and arrested him. Mr. Venessia denies hitting Mr. Rivera first, claims he would never do that especially because he only has one arm. He claims he had to hit back in self-defense. We talked about the feelings of many Puerto Ricans about Mr. Venessia being prejudiced against them. He denies this vehemently, claims he has no prejudice at all. He treats everyone alike. If they misbehave, he has to take action against them regardless of their race,

color, or national origin. He even felt abused because he feels he takes his life in his hands many times in order to protect tenants against wrongdoers. Worker asked him about reports of his beating up Puerto Ricans, especially the report we received lately about his hitting a Puerto Rican man in his apartment, New Year's (sic). He denies this completely. He told of several incidents where he had been called by tenants who were afraid and clearing up the situation without any fuss. Both Mr. Vitola, the manager, and the worker talked with him at length about not getting involved, but if there is a serious situation developing to immediately contact the police, whose job this is. He said he never strikes anyone but will defend himself anytime when someone attacks him.

Mr. Venezais is an old time policeman who believes in authority and believes in "being tough" otherwise "they take advantage of you". There is need for more training in this work. We talked about minority problems, their fears and intimidations. We discussed how groups gather together for protection, how it would be nice if he and the other housing guards and policemen would be friendly and nice to these newcomers to our community, making them feel wanted and part of the community, gaining their respect and affection, etc. He said he does try and just can't understand why anyone could feel that he has anything against them. He only wants to keep law and order.